

## Board Meeting Notes – 6<sup>th</sup> December 2023 at Novos RFC

Directors Present: Lucy Armstrong, Gary Robson, Brian Fergie, Dave Challenger and Dean Gray

Observers Present: Ruth Scott, Noel Mather and Claire Sharpe

Observers On Zoom: Penny Stewart (first 10 minutes) and Andrew Souter

Apologies – Henry Cave, Craig Wrightson, Graham Crozier

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RFU Update:

RFU Council have voted on the amended County Championship Regulations. A further amendment was made at the vote which now allows CBs to select Under 20s from 2<sup>nd</sup> teams who are from clubs who play at a higher level than Regional 1/Level 5 (ie clubs who play in National Leagues). For Northumberland this now means that Tynedale Raiders can be considered for selection.

The subject of County Championship Rugby was touched upon and an update on current thought processes at both RFU and Northern CB levels shared with those present. The Chair made it very clear that discussions were at an early stage and no final decisions had been made. As such it was important people respect the confidentiality of the discussions until such time as a full plan is agreed. Dave Challenger would further expand in his verbal report.

Adult Registration – updates to clubs in the New Year. Clubs may need some assistance. Suggested that the RFU offers some training support to CBs. **Action:** Claire

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### Chair Update

Henry is currently on a 'time out' for medical reasons. We hope to see him back soon and wish him a speedy recovery from his recent operation.

In his absence, various tasks which had previously been covered off by Henry are being shared out around Directors to ensure that tasks are completed and remain on track within set timeframes.

With Henry being absent, Lucy had spent some time reviewing the new Mems and Articles and the historic 'Rules' document with a view to harmonising the two. A first draft of revised rules has been shared with a legal colleague for review and comment. Once these have been reviewed, they will then be sent on to a couple of key people within County (who would have formed working group had Henry been available) before then being sent on to Clubs for comment and observation. Any rules are the remit of the Board and simply exist to assist with the day to day operations of the County. The Mem & Arts are the foundation and ruling document for running the County. These were approved by members (the Clubs) for the new company and adopted in July '23. The Board will sign off any rules by Easter. **Action: LVWA**

Thanks were recorded to Brian regards the diligent financial work undertaken following separation. Agreements have been reached and the £10,300 RFU funding still outstanding following separation has now been transferred to the County's account.

### Rugby Update

With apologies for no Board Report due to time restrictions and priorities on practical rugby matters (a lot of other work going on which is about to be elaborated upon), Dave gave an update around the rugby portfolio.

There have been a couple of conversations with Chairs and Charis of Rugby of other North CBs. There are a number of concerns with the County Rugby programmes and these are being discussed with other CBs.

There have been numerous issues with the County Under 18s boys programme and once this has been completed feedback will be sent to relevant parties. Comms from the North have been appalling, venue selection has been questionable, and player welfare and enjoyment seems to be bottom of the list of things to consider for this group of players. This is a view shared by other CBs, not just Northumberland. The whole programme needs reviewing.

There is considerable discussion being undertaken with other CBs with regards to the Under 20s and the Senior Mens programmes – both of which are seen as being not fit for purpose and which cost a lot of money to run with little consideration from the RFU on these running costs in relation to travel across the North CBs. The two teams together based on current programmes (the Under 20s having been expanded out to the five pool matches) cost in the region of £18k between them, with only £4k received from the RFU to support the two programmes.

With RFU blessing and support we are exploring with other North CBs an alternative programme. Discussion so far is very positive with a number of ideas being explored. The current sense is that any changes will come next season, 2024-2025. The likely focus is a “North” programme with vastly reduced costs, player welfare and enjoyment at the forefront of all decisions and the flexibility to run a programme and play multiple county teams. Any new approach will seek to restore pride and enjoyment in playing and running County rugby, simplify competition regulations and maximise the size of player pools. The new structure must also be cheaper and much better value for money. **Action: DC & LVWA**

The amendment to U20s regulations has not been officially received as yet from the RFU and does not assist with the selection criteria for senior men – Tynedale players still cannot play (even if they are 2<sup>nd</sup> team players and have played for the U20s). We are now talking about Festivals of Rugby in season 24-25, bringing back the Centurions team and maybe exploring the idea of an Over 35s Vets County Team. This would mean all clubs in all CBs could be represented at County level next season making the programme far more club inclusive and enjoyable to run.

The RFU are keen to support the ideas of the North CBs and have been part of the initial conversations. Steve Grainger is awaiting proposals from us once ideas and a provisional programme have been finalised.

If this season’s programmes do go ahead, they will run at a reduced cost.

We are also exploring with RFU and internal CB partners, running a coaching conference over a weekend in June. This will allow the CB to support clubs by putting together a programme to upskill club coaches (at all levels) within the County. Further updates on this in due course.

### **Governance and Best Practice Update**

The RFU have recently conducted the annual CB Safeguarding audit for which we have received a very good report. Mark Reade and Claire both mentioned in RFU feedback and should be congratulated on the work they do.

There is increasing crossover between safeguarding and age grade discipline. A meeting was held earlier this week to discuss matters and put forward a proposal on how communications could improve. A proposal on how Age Grade Discipline could improve was also due to be discussed however was not tabled as fierce resistance was met when trying to discuss the communication issues. A number of Safeguarding and GDPR issues were also identified during this initial meeting giving cause for concern and are being followed up on with relevant parties.

The Board was unanimous in adopting the following procedures with immediate effect.

- ***All issues relating to safeguarding, adult discipline and age grade discipline must be reported to the county administrator, however, they are received, immediately following first receipt.***
- ***The county office will be the central depository for secure, GDPR compliant, retention of all documentation relating to safeguarding, adult discipline and age grade discipline.***
- ***Where there is any potential for an issue to overlap between discipline and safeguarding functions each of the relevant leads must be informed.***
- ***The CB Discipline Secretary and Safeguarding Manager will lead on all matters relevant to their respective portfolios and will communicate directly regarding any potential cross-cutting issue.***
- ***All parties will exercise care to ensure they do not make decisions or communicate views which are outside of their individual remit.***
- ***All CB representatives must ensure they remain fully compliant with GDPR***

### **Marketing and Comms Update**

The application for the raffle license has been submitted.

As main County Rugby sponsor, Dave Penny is to be invited to the County Under 18s (boys) match at Whitley Bay Rockcliff on the 17<sup>th</sup> December.

### **Finance Update**

Separation is complete. There is an ongoing discussion about the liability for a £5k invoice from Ryecroft Glenton related to 'Oldco. The Board are clear this is the responsibility of Oldco i.e. the Trust operations.

The Board continue to await receipt of a payment from Oldco (Trust) representing their '23 dividend receipts. This was agreed and documented as part of the separation process.

Applications submitted to the Trust by NewCo have been rejected (see Finance Report) and this is affecting the programme of rugby that Northumberland County Rugby Ltd (Newco) can implement this year. It is very frustrating as a lot of new work supporting club rugby has been documented and shared with the Trust. Whilst this work has started, we may now have to be cut back.

Given dividend payments have not been received and grant applications rejected, the Chair directed the Director of Finance to complete a piece of work around the costs of "wind up" of Newco. Knowing the liabilities of the County gives a minimum amount of cash below which the board can not operate legally and thus all activities have to cease.

There was a wider conversation about what, if any, role the Board has in helping Clubs and the CB understand and navigate their relationship with the Trust. The Board is not aware of any communications from the trustees about the following:-

- Grant making processes or areas for priority focus
- Current financial position, investment performance
- Trust operations, details of trustee meetings
- Details of how trustees plan to listen to and incorporate beneficiary views into their thinking and operations.
- Trustee succession

- Selection, retention and performance management of the Trust's advisers, in particular their investment manager

The County has not received minutes of any Trust meetings and is unaware of how Trust income has been distributed since separation. The Board is unaware of whether Clubs have been told this information directly.

County funds are having to be very carefully monitored and down the line some decisions on what can and cannot be supported will have to be made in the absence of certainty of Trust support.

Thanking everyone for some quite frank discussion around some very difficult and sensitive topics, the Chair closed the meeting at 8.30pm